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CORNELIA GRÄBNER

'Don't Misunderstand Me': Apostrophe and Direct Address in Poems of Survival

For Urs M. Fiechtner

In this article I wish to revisit two important approaches to the conceptualization of the poetics of resistance, or resistance poetry, written in situations of extremity or spaces of exception. The first of these approaches argues that poetic testimony of situations of extremity is the paradigmatic act of poetic resistance; the second approach locates effective poetic resistance in the poem's situatedness within political movements and their ideologies. These two approaches are represented here by Carolyn Forché in her introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* and Barbara Harlow in *Resistance Literature*. Both scholars are primarily interested in developing an overarching concept of the resistant function of poetry through the comparative engagement with poems from a variety of cultural contexts. While this provides a good base for comparison, they productively differ in that Harlow defines the resistant function of poetry with reference to liberation and resistance struggles in the Global South, whereas Forché focuses more generally on what she terms 'situations of extremity'. As we will see, both agree in that the sociality of the poem is crucial to its efficacy as an act of resistance. My interest here lies in testing their conceptualizations of resistant poetry against poems that were written in spaces of exception and were therefore deprived of an immediate context of social relations. The question that arises is whether poems written in such contexts can be considered 'resistant' and if so, how they contribute to a wider conceptualization of poetics of resistance and how they reconfigure conceptualizations of resistance poetry. The poems I

will discuss here were written in a variety of contexts of exception: Miklós Radnóti's poem 'Forced March' was written in 1944 during a forced march and shortly before the poet's death; fragments of what became 'The Space of Freedom' were found in an Argentine torture centre that was in use during the 1976–83 military dictatorship, and the poem was then reconstructed by the German poet and translator Urs M. Fiechtner; and 'The Unbroken Thread' and 'The Black King' were written between 1973 and 1976 by the Chilean poet, musician and artist Sergio Vesely during his political imprisonment in various prisons and camps.

Jean Améry has eloquently argued that poetry as one element of intellectual life became irrelevant in those spaces that were the apotheosis of exception, the extermination camps. He narrates an episode in which a poem by Hölderlin comes to signify intellectual life as such:

I recall a winter evening when after work we were dragging ourselves, out of step, from the IG-Farben site back into the camp to the accompaniment of the Kapo's unnerving 'left, two, three, four', when – for God-knows-what reason – a flag waving in front of a half-finished building caught my eye. 'The walls stand speechless and cold, the flags clank in the wind', I muttered to myself in mechanical association. Then I repeated the stanza somewhat louder, listened to the words sound, tried to track the rhythm, and expected that the emotional and mental response that for years this Hölderlin poem had awakened in me would emerge. Nothing happened. The poem no longer transcended reality. There it was, and all that remained was an objective statement: such and such, and the Kapo roars 'left', and the soup was watery, and the flags are clanking in the wind.¹

The collapse of the distinction between *zoe* and *bios* deprives the intellectual, who is associated with *bios*, of his or her relevance.² The intellectual human being ends up in a situation of complete solitude. The extent of this solitude is exemplified when Améry seeks out a professor of philosophy, and finds him wholly unable to engage in a conversation on philosophy, which might have sustained the selves of both him and of Améry. The only source

1 J. Améry, 'The Intellectual in Auschwitz', in *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations of a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (London: Granta 1999), 7.

2 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

of resistance against the consequences of this solitude lies in collectivity or sociality. Améry points out that intellectual life did become a source of resistance when, as was the case in Dachau and in Buchenwald, 'the prisoners had the possibility to oppose to the SS state, the SS structure, an "intellectual" structure: but therefore the intellect had a social function'.³ Consequently, Améry seems to suggest that the relevance of intellectual life and everything he associated with it depended on the possibility of a sociality, and it is this contention that I wish to explore through the above-mentioned poems. For, if poetic resistance relies on the poem's social function, then this would conversely mean that poetic resistance becomes impossible in spaces where there is no possibility for poetry to have a social function.

Direct address and apostrophe as stylistic devices seem to crystallize the social function of the poem, because they explore its sociality. Why, then, would a poet who should be concerned with bare survival and who has to operate on the basis that no-one will ever read his work, write a poem that is organized around direct address? One possible answer to this question draws on the testimonial approach. It would argue that the use of direct address and of apostrophe in spaces of exception is an act of resistance against the dehumanizing reality of the camps and torture centres. This argument would be tied in with the question of what 'poetic resistance' actually entails, and this brings me to Forché's and Harlow's conceptualizations of resistant poetry.⁴

'Resistance Poetry' versus 'Poetry of Witness'

Harlow argues that the resistant function of poetry manifests itself in its use of language, its content, the poet's political commitment, and the reinvention of the cultural institution of literature. In all cases, the resistant

3 Améry, 'The Intellectual in Auschwitz', 15.

4 I use 'resistant poetry' when referring to poetry that seeks to fulfill a function of resistance. 'Resistance poetry' refers to Harlow's definition of the term.

function of poetry is contingent upon the poet's and the poem's place within the movements that carry out these struggles: resistance poetry is produced by and productive of resistance movements. The first of these points is tied in with the 'guerrilla warfare of the poem', in that the poetic language of the resistance poem challenges traditional modes of decoding and, at the same time, creates new ones:

Poetic language [...] is considered an integral part of the ideological foundations of the new social order, personal as well as public, the language of decrees no less than of love letters. The new language, the language made from the combined forces of resistance and poetry, is still to be forged.⁵

The function of the poet who writes such poetry is closely related to that of the *guerrilla* leader; in fact, many of the poets whose work forms Harlow's corpus are also militants of political movements, in many cases of *guerrilla* groups. Consequently, the cultural significance of poetry by far exceeds the meaning or sophistication of an individual poem, because poetry is 'part of the cultural institutions and the historical existence of a people' and is therefore 'itself an arena of struggle'.⁶ This latter point applies to both poetic language and poetry as a cultural institution, as resistance poetry challenges the bourgeois institution of poetry as a project of aesthetics⁷ and 'as a rarefied or transcendent means of expression'.⁸ Finally, Harlow argues that poetry has a double function 'as a force of mobilizing a collective response to occupation and domination and as a repository for popular memory and consciousness'.⁹ Thus, popular memory as articulated in poetry forms part of a wider project of cultural and political liberation. This definition of resistance poetry implies that the political dominates over the social and the personal. Harlow states this explicitly and in the context of the political commitment of her own approach: 'Whereas the social and the personal have tended to displace the political in western literary and cultural studies,

5 B. Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 62.

6 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 33.

7 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 35.

8 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 62.

9 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 34.

the emphasis in the literature of resistance is on the political as the power to change the world. The theory of resistance literature is in its politics'.¹⁰

Even though the poems in Forché's anthology include poems from anti-colonial liberation struggles, she comes to argue the opposite to Harlow: she emphasizes the social over the political. With reference to a poem by the Cuban Angel Cuadra, she writes:

The 'I' that speaks the [Cuadra's] poem, that begins and ends it, is [...] an attempt to redeem speech from the silence of pain, and integrity from the disintegrating forces of extremity. The poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political and in so doing defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion. It often seeks to register through indirection and intervention the ways in which the linguistic and moral universes have been disrupted by events. (45)

Forché draws here on Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, where the author discusses representations of the body that has suffered violence. Scarry argues that on the social level, representations of traumatic experiences are an important invitation to a collective coming to terms with trauma and violence. Similarly and with reference to representations of the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub apply the therapeutic situation of dealing with trauma to a social context. Laub points out that in psychotherapy, the process of healing requires a witness to the narrative of trauma – usually the psychotherapist – and Felman extends this argument to include the readership of literature that deals with trauma. With reference to Paul Celan's 'Death Fugue', she writes:

An event directed toward the recreation of a 'thou', poetry becomes [...] the event of creating an address for the specificity of a historical experience which annihilated any possibility of address. [...] Celan's poetry now strives not simply [...] to seek out the responsive you, to recreate the listener, the hearer, but to subvert, to dislocate and to displace the very essence of aesthetics as a project of artistic mastery by transforming poetry – as breakage of the word and as drifting testimony – into an inherent and unprecedented, testimonial project of address.¹¹

10 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 30.

11 S. Felman and D. Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 38.

For Felman, Celan's use of address extends from the search for a listener – a reader who agrees to become the witness to the testimonial poem – to a new 'testimonial project of address', which displaces 'the very essence of aesthetics' and thus, has a deep social impact on the way in which we as a society appreciate poetry. The testimonial approach to witnessing posits a situation in which the therapeutic situation is transferred into the social sphere. The 'I' that speaks the poems, and which expresses the subjectivity of the poet, is salvaged or affirmed by the appeal to and the response by a present or future social context, in which there are listeners, interlocutors, and respondents to the lyrical I. Thus, 'witnessing' becomes the one poetic act that restores social relevance to poetry and that, moreover, requires a revisiting of aesthetics. Consequently, the testimonial character of poetry fulfils a social function which, as Forché points out, cannot be understood as political if the 'political' is defined in terms of partisanship.

Thus, Harlow and Forché take radically different approaches when it comes to a definition of what resistance in poetry consists of and what resistance poetry seeks to achieve: whereas Forché rejects the political as partisan, Harlow posits it as indispensable for the resistant function of poetry; Forché focuses on the poet as individual, Harlow emphasizes the poet's location within a movement; Forché focuses on the poem as an act of resistance, Harlow argues that the poem is inseparable from literature as a cultural institution and from the political movement that the poem emerges from. For Forché, the implicitly present therapeutic situation draws on the social element of poetry and in doing so, achieves the integration of the personal with the social; for Harlow, the political renders the personal and the social secondary or even, unnecessary. In spite of their differences, both scholars do agree on two – linked – points. Firstly, that the collective or communal dimension is crucial to an effective poetic practice of resistance. And secondly, that poetic testimony is an act of resistance, though representatives of both approaches disagree on whether testimony forms part of a wider project of rewriting history, or whether it is the touchstone for a new aesthetics. Importantly, both consider the collective or communal dimension indispensable for testimony as the overcoming of trauma.

Apostrophic Poems in the Space of Exception

Apostrophe and direct address are means through which poems construct and also question sociality. As we have seen in Felman's reading of Celan's 'Death Fugue', these stylistic devices lend themselves to a reading of poetry as testimony; and they also seem to suggest a straightforward reading as the poem as an act of resistance in the spirit of Harlow's analysis. However, such readings rely on the notion that the poems will find their addressee. None of the poets whose work I discuss here at the time of writing knew if they were going to survive, or if anyone other than themselves would read their poems. Had Miklós Radnóti's body not been exhumed and had his wife Fanni Gyarmati not searched his coat pockets and rescued the notebook with his last poems, those poems would have been lost. We do not even know what happened to the original Argentine author of 'The Space of Freedom'; but had Urs M. Fiechtner not come across the fragments of the poem and reconstructed the poem in its entirety, it would not be available to us. Sergio Vesely did survive, but could not count on his survival when he wrote 'The Unbroken Thread' and 'The Black King.' The communicative situation of each poem was therefore precarious and consequently, the poets were almost by default obliged to reflect on the communicative situation they are located in. Furthermore, direct address is not always as straightforward as a reading along the testimonial or Harlow's approach would presuppose. William Waters argues that direct address creates

not so much a stable communicative situation as a chronic hesitation, a faltering, between monologue and dialogue, between 'talking about' and 'talking to', third and second person, indifference to interlocutors and the yearning to have one.¹²

Waters draws here on Jonathan Culler's argument that 'apostrophe [...]' makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit

12 W. Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 8.

or situation of communication itself'.¹³ The acuteness of the communicative situation for a poem is exacerbated in the space of exception.

Culler makes several points that are relevant for the analysis of apostrophic poems in spaces of exception and which, at the same time, seem to suggest that apostrophic poems in spaces of exception would be pointless. Firstly, Culler argues that

the vocative of apostrophe is a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him. The object is treated as a subject, an I which implies a certain type of you in its turn. One who successfully involves nature is one to whom nature might, in its turn, speak.¹⁴

However, in order to poetically negotiate the relationship between Self and Other, there has to be a Self; or there has to be the potential for the Self to emerge. Yet spaces of exception create conditions that annihilate the Self, and Améry's reflections leave no doubt about the effectiveness of this attempt. The annihilation of the poet's Self also problematizes another, related point made by Culler: that the use of apostrophe explores the poet's power to bestow life on absent others or on inanimate objects. Barbara Johnson has developed this particular point with reference to dead persons, and has elaborated on the precariousness of the poet's power to apostrophize.¹⁵ In spaces of exception, eclipsing the Self becomes a matter of survival. Conversely, this would preclude the existence of a poetic subject so powerful that it can treat objects as subjects; even the use of direct address becomes questionable, because the poet cannot rely on there ever again being a responsive addressee.

Secondly, Culler defines apostrophe as a temporal figure of writing: it locates the apostrophized objects or persons 'in the time of the apostrophe – a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can

¹³ J. Culler, 'Apostrophe', in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 135.

¹⁴ Culler, 'Apostrophe', 142.

¹⁵ B. Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 184–99.

say "now".¹⁶ Apostrophe is not a narrative figure but a discursive one; it does not seek to relate events but to constitute an interlocutor. Consequently, in an apostrophic poem 'Nothing need happen because the poem itself is to be the happening'.¹⁷ As we will see, this point is relevant because none of the poets whose work I discuss here – with the possible exception of Sergio Vesely – could assume that anyone else would ever read their work. Consequently, the primary meaning of the poems must have been located within the present moment.

If the communicative situation of direct address is unstable even when the poem exists in a context which is sympathetic to its very existence, the degree of instability would be exacerbated if the poem is written from inside a space of exception, where the existence of the poem is precarious. In her reading of Miklós Radnóti's poem 'Forced March', Forché implies that the apostrophe stabilizes the uncertain communicative situation and turns the poem into an act of testimony. Therefore, the poem evidences the importance of the social context for poetry of witness. Since I will make extensive reference to the poem, I quote it in full:¹⁸

The man who, having collapsed, rises, takes steps, is insane;
he'll move an ankle, a knee, an errant mass of pain,
and take to the road again as if wings were to lift him high;
in vain the ditch will call him: he simply dare not stay;
and should you ask, why not? perhaps he'll turn and answer:
his wife is waiting back home, and a death, one beautiful, wiser.
But see, the wretch is a fool, for over the homes, that world
long since nothing but singed winds have been known to whirl;
his housewall lies supine; your plum tree, broken clear,
and all the nights back home horripilate with fear.
Oh, if I could believe that I haven't merely borne
what is worthwhile, in my heart; that there is, to return, a home:
tell me it's all still there: the cool verandah, bees
of peaceful silence buzzing, while the plum jam cooled;

¹⁶ Culler, 'Apostrophe', 149.

¹⁷ Culler, 'Apostrophe', 149.

¹⁸ Miklós Radnóti, 'Forced March', in C. Forché (ed.), *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 369.

where over sleepy gardens summer-end peace sunbathed,
 and among bow and foliage fruits were swaying naked;
 and, blonde, my Fanni waited before the redwood fence,
 with morning slowly tracing its shadowed reticence ...
 But all that could still be — tonight the moon is so round!
 Don't go past me, my friend — shout! and I'll come around!

Forché writes:

The poem becomes an apostrophe to a fellow marcher, and so it is not only a record of experience but an exhortation and a plea against despair. It is not a cry for sympathy but a call for strength. The hope that the poem relies on, however, is not 'political' as such: it is not a celebration of solidarity in the name of a class or common enemy. It is not partisan in any accepted sense. It opposes the dream of future satisfaction to the reality of current pain. One could argue that it uses the promise of personal happiness against a politically induced misery, but it does so in the name of the poet's fellows, in a spirit of communality.¹⁹

Forché suggests that by way of the apostrophe, Radnóti creates a sociality or community with his fellow marcher. The apostrophe functions here as an illocutionary speech act: the fellow marcher is apostrophized, which bestows a social meaning to the poem. Thus, the poem successfully appeals to a communality that reaches beyond the poet and his fellow marcher. In so doing, it becomes 'an exhortation' and 'plea against despair', and overcomes silence and isolation through an act of witnessing.

However, a closer look at Radnóti's use of direct address and invocation invites a number of questions and reminds us that the poem was written in a space of exception. Radnóti uses direct address five times throughout the poem. Initially, he addresses an outsider and invites him to join himself in looking at his fellow marcher: '[...] and should you ask, why not?' suggests that both lyrical I and interlocutor are observing from a distance. A normative judgement reaffirms the distance: 'But see, the wretch is a fool'. However, the poem then abandons the addressee for two lines of lyricism:

19 C. Forché, 'Introduction', in *Against Forgetting*, 32.

Oh, if I could believe that I haven't merely borne
 what is worthwhile, in my heart: that there is, to return, a home:

These two lines of lyricism in which 'the poet turns his back on his listeners' initiate a shift in the constitution of Self and Other as performed through address. The lyrical I abandons their distant position and observant attitude and now demands an entirely different response from the addressee: 'Tell me it's all still there.' What Radnóti wishes to 'still be there' is his own version of what initially seemed to be his fellow marcher's dream, and what he has only just called a foolish memory: the fertile peaceful summer landscape of 'home', and his wife Fanni Gyarmati waiting for him. By mentioning Fanni by name, the poet identifies himself as the speaker of the poem; moreover, he constitutes his own Self through the reference to his wife.

The explicit mention of Fanni and the unambiguous identification of the lyrical I with Radnóti conversely highlights the ambivalence of the speech situation and the 'faltering between "talking about" and "talking to"' (Waters). This ambiguity raises questions regarding the identity of the apostrophized and addressed persons: is Radnóti always addressing his fellow marcher, or is he addressing a third person? Why does the fellow marcher disappear after the first half of the poem? Who is the 'friend' he addresses in the last line of the poem? What exactly does 'the dream of future satisfaction' (Forché) consist of? And does Radnóti really suggest that this dream might become reality? Or is what Forché calls a 'dream', the memory of a past reality? Moreover, if Culler is right and the apostrophic poem has its own temporality which is always in the here and now, can we even speak of a temporal sequentiality or opposition between 'present misery' and 'future satisfaction'? Perhaps most importantly: *is* the fellow marcher another human being, or is Radnóti looking at himself? The poet was probably in a similar condition to his 'fellow marcher', and that many of his last poems were addressed to his wife suggests that Radnóti's desire for survival – just like the fellow marcher's – was very much motivated by the desire to be reunited with her.

If the fellow marcher is an apostrophized Other, as Forché suggests, then Radnóti exercises his poetic power by apostrophizing 'an errant mass of pain' as a fellow human being with hopes, dreams and the ability to love.

He then recognizes himself in this person and solidarizes himself with him/her on the basis that they share what literally keeps them going. In this case, Radnóti apostrophizes his own lost self in line with Culler's claim that the apostrophizing of an Other constitutes the self, and by exercising the ability to empathize with another human being. If, on the other hand, Radnóti appeals to his addressee to apostrophize him on the same basis on which Radnóti apostrophizes the fellow marcher, Radnóti asks for respect for his own, maltreated humanity: to be recognized as a human being that is simultaneously 'an errant mass of pain' and a person with hopes, dreams, and the ability to love. In both cases, Culler's point that apostrophe initiates a relationship with an Other in order for the lyrical I to constitute his or her own self, is as crucial as the temporality of the apostrophic poem: the temporality of the apostrophe inscribes Radnóti's gaze of empathy into the words that make up the poem, and which preserve his Self and his humanity in a performative apostrophizing of poetic subjectivity every time a potential addressee enters the poem's 'now'.

'The Space of Freedom' uses direct address for a similar purpose. In the first of the two stanzas, the poet places the poem temporally, after routine torture sessions that same day and before more devastating sessions the next. At the end of the stanza, the poet evokes a metaphorical 'space of freedom' to counter the environment of the torture centre:²⁰

Today was a very long day. From nine o'clock until five o'clock
they worked, and now my body is beyond my
control. My skin is a field of craters, a
no-man's-land between enemy lines, a network of
beaten-up cells, burnt, painful, reddened
by fever. I cannot stand up or lie down. I walk
back and forth and know that after tomorrow I will not

²⁰ The translation into English is my own. It is based on the German version of the poem, which was published in *Notizen vor Tagesanbruch*. 'The Space of Freedom' opens up questions regarding authorship. Fiechtner reconstructed the poem from 'fragments', and the authorship is in that sense his own. At the same time, Fiechtner does become the mouthpiece and the translator of the author of the fragments, whose identity we do not know.

be able to walk. Tomorrow they will kill the soles of my feet.
But the space that is underneath my skin
and even behind my bones
the space of the horizon, the space which is locked
into each body, this space of freedom they won't touch.

The speaker objectifies his own body in a similar way as Radnóti objectified the fellow marcher's, as 'an errant mass of pain'. In 'The Space of Freedom', the body is objectified as 'a field of craters' and as 'a network of beaten-up cells'. Body and voice are metaphorically distanced from each other through the spatial metaphor of 'a no-man's-land between enemy lines', which also indicates that the body is a dangerous and precarious place to inhabit because it is located in the line of fire. Both Radnóti's body and that of the speaker in 'The Space of Freedom' are on the move and on the verge of collapse: the lyrical I in 'The Space of Freedom' states that tomorrow the only function his body can still carry out today – walking – will become impossible; for Radnóti's fellow marcher, walking is already almost impossible. Thus, the body becomes unavailable as a place in which the self is protected and from where it can speak. The space of freedom withdraws deep inside the body, where the torturer cannot reach.

The beginning of the second stanza undermines this seemingly hopeful ending of the first stanza, and intensifies the expressed disagreement by means of a direct address.

Don't misunderstand me: Tomorrow
I won't be a hero. There are no heroes, except
at festivities and among the dead. Once again I will
scream and once again I will vomit. I will be
humiliated once again,
once again I will be a bundle of horror, howling
with bewilderment. I will have died for moments. But I will be
once again a human being, part of creation,
which never allows for its dignity to be taken. I will be
proud in the middle of degradations. I will
sign each and every confession, each true one, each false one.
When there is nothing left to bear I might
possibly deny my own mother, I will
beg on my knees, I will say everything

they want to hear from me. But I will lose not one word, not one gesture, not one description, not one expression regarding my existence as a human being.

The lyrical I rectifies a misconception that is potentially created in the first stanza, that the lyrical I may be considered a hero because he manages to preserve the space of freedom, even when he is subjected to torture. The type of misunderstanding suggests that the implied addressee must be sympathetic to the lyrical I, and that the lyrical I and the addressee share a common frame of reference through a discourse of heroism. Yet, the lyrical I appeals to his comrades not in the expected way of appealing to the shared values that underpin such discourses, but by violating their implied conventions and narratives on the basis of his recent experience. A passage from Vesely's short text 'Maltreated Intimacy' suggests a possible explanation:

[The political prisoner] is on his own. His comrades avoid any encounter because they know that he passed on information that made it possible for the secret police to uncover the underground work of a cadre cell. They mistrust him, they isolate him. He, in turn, knows that any justification of what he has done is useless. How can a person who is accused because he did not know how to lie, ask for forgiveness?²¹

The lyrical I turns his own subjective and extreme experience into the touchstone for his group's discourse; by claiming respect for the human complexity that is expressed in the co-existence of apparent betrayal and the ability to maintain a space of freedom, he turns direct address into a small but significant act of agency and self-respect, with an effect that is analogous to Radnóti's gaze of empathy.

The dissent of the lyrical I with his interlocutor goes even further than explicit disagreement. The last lines of the poem suggest that the speaker withholds from his potential interlocutor the exact gesture or the exact word that regards his existence as a human being; he does tell them that they exist, but he does not tell them what they are. The refusal to make

21 Sergio Vesely, 'Geschundene Intimität', in *Jenseits der Mauern* (Tübingen: A.S. Verlag, 1983), 20–2. All translations of Vesely's German texts into English are my own.

such an important contribution to an existing discourse of heroism refuses participation in the type of resistance that has as its core the loyalty to a particular movement or to an ideology. Moreover, it places the protection of the intimacy encapsulated in the space of freedom above all else, even above the allegiance to a political community.

The temporality of the apostrophic poem becomes crucial here. For Radnóti humanity is expressed through the ability to love, hope, and to long, and it is located in what is his equivalent of the space of freedom: his gaze of empathy. Importantly, the space of freedom and the gaze of empathy exist simultaneously to the space of exception that the poem is written from. Thus, the ability to manifest one's self through disagreement, or to recognize oneself as a human being with the ability to love by looking at someone who also knows these feelings, and to insist on and claim respect for their own vulnerability and complexity, exists at the same time as the dislocation before experience as expressed in 'an errant mass of pain' (Radnóti) and 'a bundle of horror' (Fiechtner); as the encounter with death – and the return from death – as expressed in 'I will have died for moments' and in 'in vain the ditch will call him he simply dare not stay'; as the non-heroic acts committed under torture; and at the same time as the proximity to insanity. The temporality of the apostrophic poem in the 'now' freezes this co-existence in the moment in time, and the poem encapsulates in words the performative preservation of the Self, expressed in the address.

The Unbroken Thread

The space of freedom is also present in the poetry of Sergio Vesely, but with the difference that his early work, which spans his imprisonment from 1973 to 1976, moves uneasily between a withdrawal into the lyrical and a cautious exploration of possibilities of address. These two poles are exemplified here by 'The Unbroken Thread' and 'The Black King'.

It is important to note that the space of exception that those poems were written in differs from those in which the previously analysed poems were written. In contradistinction to Radnóti and the speaker in 'The Space of Freedom', Vesely could at least during some phases of his imprisonment draw on a – limited and precarious – sociality for cultural work. He was at times allowed to write and receive letters, and to have visitors. In the camps of Los Álamos and Puchuncaví, the community of prisoners wrote and staged several plays, and they did have the opportunity to share their poems, songs, and thoughts with each other. The plays were published together with extensive documentation on cultural work in the camps in the books *Puchuncaví* and *Jenseits der Mauern* (*Beyond these Walls*), after Vesely's release into exile in Germany. In the preface to *Puchuncaví*, Vesely explains the conditions under which the plays, poems and songs were created:

[...] the term 'concentration camp' has a different meaning in Chile than it does in German history books. The Chilean concentration camp was not an extermination camp, not even in the times of the most brutal persecution and murder. Torture and murder happened elsewhere, in the more or less secret interrogation centres of the secret service, in the military academies or in police precincts, or simply in the street. The concentration camps served a different purpose: for many political prisoners they were a type of 'sanatorium' for the physical recuperation between two phases of interrogation. [...] Our limited possibilities to develop a type of cultural work behind the barbed wire did not turn the barracks and the Appellplatz into an idyll. We were more or less safe from the barbaric torture of electric shocks and rape, but we were under constant psychological pressure which, in the long run, affected us as much as the beatings and the shackles. Below the surface of an apparent peacefulness, the political prisoner was a mass product without rights; and anyone – as long as they were wearing a uniform – could do with us as they pleased.²²

The situation that Vesely describes permits for the prisoners what David Wood and I in a different context have called 'porous autonomy'. We coined the term in the introduction to a special issue on the Poetics of Resistance, to conceptualize the relative autonomy of art works in neoliberal societies.

22 Vesely, *Puchuncaví*, 11–12.

Artists often find themselves in a position in which they have to negotiate their own opposition to neoliberalism with the conditions of production posed by contexts which are, to various degrees, inserted into a neoliberal system. 'Porous autonomy' suggests that works of art are not necessarily entirely co-opted when they are produced within these circuits, but neither do they appropriate conditions for their own benefit. Rather, they maintain a 'porous autonomy'. Moreover, the concept of 'autonomy' makes reference to political projects that have to contend with a lack of real, institutional power, and where cultural production becomes a more important source of identity construction, than political institutions. Finally, the concept points towards the need to safeguard such cultural projects by obtaining political power and by constructing a protective political and institutional context. We then extended the meaning of the term to refer to a relationship of negotiation between a critically distant, autonomous work of art on the one hand, and a social or political movement that the artist feels committed to on the other hand. 'Porous autonomy' seeks to account for a process of relationality which allows for an agent – in this particular context of analysis, often but not always an artist – to exercise commitment while at the same time avoiding participation in a total reality, whether this reality is constructed by adverse social and political conditions, or by a sympathetic movement.²³

Importantly, 'porous autonomy' places a heavy share of the responsibility for the degrees of porosity and of autonomy on the agent and on her or his decision-making capacities and personal resolve. This emphasis on the subjective element of resistance echoes Vesely's conceptualization of what 'resistance' meant for the prisoners in Puchuncaví. In the introduction to *Puchuncaví*, he writes: 'I am trying to give a few impressions of the "internal resistance" of the prisoner, of the deep will to not bend, and to oppose to the exterior force of repression, the interior force of imagination and of creativity.'²⁴ The central metaphor of the poem 'The Unbroken Thread'

23 C. Gräbner and D. Wood, 'Poetics of Resistance: An Introduction', *Cosmos and History*, Special Issue 'Poetics of Resistance' (<http://cosmosandhistory.org/>).

24 Gräbner and Wood, 'Poetics of Resistance', 12.

develops this focus on interiority but also performs a cautious negotiation with the exterior:²⁵

UN HILO INTACTO

mientras siga admirando
la expedida claridad de un ave

mientras siga sintiéndome ansioso
con los atardeceres plácidos

mientras me siga alegrando con
las palomas
cuando copulan sobre el muro

o mientras siga, en silencio
gozando las horas, el mar
y los cerros por los barrotes

entonces, en mi rostro
en mis actos, entre mis palabras
siempre habrá un hilo
de algo humano,
intacto.

AN UNBROKEN THREAD

as long as i still admire
the easy clarity of a bird

as long as i still feel anxious
at the placid sunsets

as long as i still feel joy for
the doves
when they copulate on the wall

or as long as in silence i still
enjoy the hours, the sea
and the hills through the bars

in my face
in my actions, among my words
there will always be a thread
of something human,
unbroken.

In 'The Unbroken Thread' Vesely negotiates interiority and exteriority through what I call the 'apostrophizing gaze'. The 'humanity' of the lyrical 'I' comes from his interaction with what is exterior to him, in this case, inanimate objects and nature, symbolized by the birds, the doves, and the mountains. Contemplating them enables him to feel his Self, an impulse which is located in his own interiority. The apostrophizing gaze constitutes his Self with reference to exteriority; yet, the poet does not trust in or does not want to exercise his power to apostrophize through words. Thus, he locates the apostrophe within his gaze, which he then expresses through

25 The poem was published in a translation into German in *Notizen vor Tagesanbruch*. The translation into English is my own. The Spanish original was supplied by the author.

the words of the poem. The unbroken thread connects objects, landscape, face, actions, words, and the intactness of the poet's feeling human.

The apostrophizing gaze as expressed in 'The Unbroken Thread' is akin to Radnóti's gaze of empathy on the fellow marcher, and Vesely's emphasis on the ability to feel draws on the same impulse as Radnóti, who finds his Self in the ability to feel emotions like love, hope, and longing. Just like 'Forced March', the metaphorical space of freedom originates from a relational gaze on others. In both cases, the poems become mirrors in which the poet can recognize himself as a human being; it is here that he sees the features of his face and places the words, among (or between) which there is the unbroken thread of 'something human'.²⁶

Vesely's song-poem 'The Black King,' like 'Forched March,' evokes a pastoral landscape as an imaginary counter-space to the camp; and like Radnóti in 'Forced March,' Vesely explores the relationship between space and address. 'The Black King' was written as a song, and as a gift for a baby girl who was born in Puchuncaví.²⁷ Through the rich and colourful, metaphorically charged language, paired with a content that can be read either as a political utopia, or as a fairy-tale land from a children's story, Vesely sets a counterpoint to the reality of the camp:

Una historia verdadera,

Hijo mío, te la cuento:

Ocurrió hace mucho tiempo,

En la tierra, había un rey negro.

I will tell you, my child,

a true story:

It happened a long time ago,

When on earth there was a black king.

26 The apostrophizing gaze as a means of negotiating the relationship between language, space and environment, and self and other, recurs in other poems that were written in situations of exception or that refer to them, for example Urs Fiechtner's short story 'Ana Rosa', in which a couple draw on this gaze to apostrophize each other's subjectivities throughout imprisonment and torture sessions in a South American camp. Their apostrophizing gaze is finally interrupted through the humiliating and disempowering asylum application process in West Germany.

27 See the story 'Das Geschenk' ('The Gift'), in U.M. Fiechtner and Sergio Vesely, *Geschichten aus dem Niemandsland* (Baden-Baden: Signal Verlag, 1990), 10–16.

Vivía al borde de una fuente
y su casa era de barro,
era amigo de la gente,
todos eran sus hermanos.

Había un sol en cada árbol,
había pastores y bueyes,
había música en el viento,
había música en el viento,
en el tiempo del rey negro.

He lived on the shores of a spring
and his house was made of clay,
he was the friend of the people,
who were his brothers.

In each tree there was a sun,
there were shepherds and cows,
the wind was full of music,
the wind was full of music,
in the times of the black king.

Like Radnóti's evocation of home, Vesely's land of the Black King exists in a temporality that could be past or future. The ability to still envision such a space and to find a language for it, performs in itself the feelings of love and longing that form part of preserving the Self. Moreover, the poem gives this language and this space to a child who was literally born into the reality of a military dictatorship, and it entrusts the child with a message:

Hijo mío, estoy tan triste,
desapareció el rey negro.
Hace tiempo no lo veo,
desde el día que fui grande.
Tu saldrás ahora a buscarlo,
le dirás que lo recuerdo,
que lo llevo en mi maleta,
le dirás que voy llorando.

My child, I'm so sad,
the black king disappeared.
I have not seen him in a long time,
not since the day I grew up.
Now you are leaving to look for him,
tell him that I remember him,
that I carry him in my suitcase,
tell him that I'm crying.

When Vesely entrusts his message to the newborn child, he also offers her a guiding principle: to look for the black king who does not rule, who does not give orders, who is king because he respects others. What can be read as a nostalgic longing for the innocence of childhood, is in fact an emphatic renunciation of any disciplinary order or ideology and, by way of the use of language, gives absolute priority to the imagination and to creativity.

Vesely's early work uneasily explores these two opposing poles of relating to others, as expressed in the withdrawal through lyrical contemplation vis-à-vis the cautious address of others, especially through songs. 'The Black King' is a milestone in his work because here, Vesely begins to articulate

the radical refusal to be accommodated in the world as it is. Ever since, Vesely has frequently and explicitly rejected attempts to co-opt his work into any ideology or agenda outside his own creative imagination. This has led to radical statements like the ones articulated in songs such as 'Canto por mí' ('I sing for myself') where he expresses his refusal to sing with anyone's approval or express anything other than his thoughts and feelings, the poem 'The Death of the Multiplication Table's angry mockery of those who, in the face of contemporary realities of exception, still maintain that two by two is four, or the song 'Progress' which, based on a poem by Fiechtner, defines 'progress' as the people's refusal to be led by, or to follow any person, religion or ideology.

Rescinding Complicity

The formulation that Vesely refuses to be accommodated in the world as it is, alludes to Adorno's reflection on the committed art work's gesture of addressing the listener, in his article 'Commitment':

Hidden in the notion of a 'message', of art's manifesto, even if it is politically radical, is a moment of accommodation to the world; the gesture of addressing the listener contains a secret complicity with those being addressed, who can, however, be released from their illusions only if that complicity is rescinded.²⁸

The communicative situation in the space of exception questions not only the certainty and nature of response; it also sharpens the acuteness of questions regarding the complicity of the addressor with the addressee. Vesely's cautious use of address and his frequent withdrawal from lyricism express his awareness of the 'secret complicity with those being addressed', and his desire to rescind it. The lyrical I in 'The Space of Freedom' rescinds

28 T.W. Adorno, 'Commitment', in R. Tiedemann (ed.), *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 257.

their complicity with their interlocutor by turning the gesture of address into one of disagreement. In doing so, the lyrical I articulates his or her refusal to be accommodated within a 'world' that subscribes to a particular conceptualization of heroism and resistant subjectivity. Similarly, Radnóti's shift in the solicited response from his interlocutor pushes the addressed subject from one position into another and in doing so, asks insistent questions about the conventions according to which they can feel addressed, and on the basis of which they can respond. Thus, the poems discussed here unhinge models on the basis of which the addressee could feel comfortably interpellated,²⁹ and relocate the agency of the lyrical I in the refusal of complicity and of accommodation within a world designed by others. This act of agency preserves the Self, and – rooted in the eternal 'now' of the apostrophic poem – is encapsulated in the speech situation of the poem.

None of the poems discussed here contain references to political movements, groups or ideologies as a source of a resistant subjectivity in the space of exception, in line with Harlow's conceptualization of poetic resistance. The space of freedom, Radnóti's gaze of empathy, and Vesely's unbroken thread suggest a stronger affinity with a phenomenon that the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos from the EZLN makes reference to in his definition of resistance:

A fundamental factor is the capacity for resistance of the aggrieved, the intelligence to combine ways of resistance and, something which might sound 'subjective', the decision-making capacities of the aggrieved human beings. The territory to be conquered [...] will then have to turn itself into a territory in resistance. And I am not referring to the number of trenches, weapons, traps and security systems (which are, however, also necessary), but to the willingness (the 'Morality/Morale' some might say) of those human beings to resist.³⁰

²⁹ I have avoided the term 'interpellation' because as Althusser shows, interpellation functions on the basis of social convention. The use of address and of apostrophe in poems of survival has to necessarily avoid interpellating the listener, unless they endorse conventions that provide the framework for interpellation. As I argue in this paper, these poems are unable to, and lead to a refusal of such conventions.

³⁰ S.I. Marcos, 'El mundo: siete pensamientos en mayo 2003', *Revista Rebelión* 5, May 2003, internet edition, no page numbers.

Marcos's point resonates strongly with Vesely's formulation of 'the profound will not to bend' which, for Vesely, lies in the beginning and at the core of resistance through art. This 'profound will not to bend' or 'willingness of those human beings to resist' refuses to be assimilated, though it does permit the possibility to commit.³¹

It would also be misleading to read the poems discussed here as testimonial. Radnóti's confounding of the speech situation through shifts in direct address makes it difficult to identify what exactly he is testifying to. Similarly, the lyrical I in 'The Space of Freedom' does not wish to testify to the torture he has suffered, but asks the interlocutor to relate to him on the basis of his ability to exist in the space of freedom even in the face of torture. Vesely's early work in its entirety takes a radical stance against witnessing. Even though the poems and songs reference the spaces of exception they were written in, his focus is always on the power of the imagination, on the detailed observation of his surroundings and often, on a metaphorically rich and colourful language. All three poets ask to be understood as subjects who are, at the moment of writing, salvaging their subjectivity in spaces of exception. Urs M. Fiechtner's term of 'poetry of survival', coined with reference to the work of Sergio Vesely, successfully captures the performative structure and the purpose of these poems.

Most problematically, Harlow's and Forché's approaches rely on the notion that the speaking subject wishes to be accommodated into the 'world', whether this 'world' is defined by commitment to a cause or by society's willingness to listen to testimony. However, in the performative

³¹ The ideological development of the EZLN is significant for this argument. The EZLN developed out of a *guerrilla* movement of the 1970s, analogous to many of the movements that Harlow discusses in *Resistance Literature*. However, the EZLN has explicitly distanced themselves from these movements, most clearly because of different conceptualizations of democracy and the EZLN's rejection of vanguardism. Because different conceptualizations of the role of the Self and of community lie at the heart of these disagreements, one can argue that the concept of resistance put forward by Marcos stands in contradiction to that put forward by Harlow. The break of the EZLN from Maoist and Leninist ideology is discussed throughout the interviews collected in LeBot.

moment of survival, there is no world into which the subject could be accommodated – only the space of exception. If poems of survival are always performative, then inscribing them within the framework of testimony turns them into a narrative of witnessing; it is one manifestation of what Culler has identified as the tendency of literary critics to 'repress them [apostrophes] or rather to transform apostrophe into description' (136). Turning apostrophic poems of survival into narratives of testimony eschews what Culler has called the 'embarrassment' caused by apostrophe.

Poems of survival ask two embarrassing questions of their readers. The first is articulated very clearly by the lyrical I of 'The Space of Freedom', and it is related to what Ernst van Alphen has called 'symptoms of discursivity'. Van Alphen argues that the inability to overcome trauma has been partially caused by the absence of a social discourse that permits the articulation of the traumatic experience of Holocaust survivors.³² The lyrical I of 'The Space of Freedom' asks his sympathetic addressee whether there is a committed discourse of survival that does not depend on the discourse of heroism which destroys the very autonomy that has only just allowed the speaker to salvage his Self. One can extend this question to be relevant to a wider public, where it would ask whether there is a discourse of survival that does not exclusively interpellate the survivor as a victim of torture and extremity, but considers the complexity of a Self that is 'a bundle of horror' and yet maintains and protects 'the gesture regarding my existence as a human being' and 'the unbroken thread'.³³

32 See E. van Alphen, 'Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory and Trauma', in M. Bal, J. Crewe and L. Spitzer (eds), *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), 24–38.

33 In some ways this argument draws on the different experiences of survival of Jean Améry and Primo Levi, most explicitly articulated by Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*. A comparative reading between Vesely's and Levi's stories of survival as narratives of survival would productively contribute to the theoretical argument proposed here. However, it would exceed the scope of this particular article, which focuses on the use of direct address and apostrophe in poems written during situations of extremity.

The second embarrassing question asked by the poets who speak from spaces of exception is whether their addressees – who are presumably located outside of these spaces; presumably, us – can offer them a world into which, with good conscience, we could ask them to accommodate themselves after surviving situations of extremity. With reference to Auschwitz and post-war society, Adorno has replied to this question with a clear 'No'. With reference to the experience of the South American dictatorships and to our implicatedness in strategies of disempowerment through the ways in which we treat refugees and asylum seekers, Urs M. Fiechtner's work insistently asks the same question and gives the same answer. As long as we cannot answer this question with an unequivocal 'yes', we are not released from a political engagement that makes claims well beyond the intimacy of the therapeutic situation even and especially when transferred into the social sphere, and beyond the assimilation of experiences of survival into any ideologically defined utopia.

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ARTURO CASAS

Teoría crítica y discurso de resistencia: lo político en la enunciación poética¹

Las reflexiones que siguen, en torno a la acción cultural y la intervención artística y literaria en las coordenadas del mundo actual, pueden entenderse como una invitación a releer algunos textos caracterizados por la complejidad y el alcance de los problemas tratados y a la vez por la urgencia histórica ante el estado de cosas al que están conduciendo la economía y la cultura política neoliberales. La interlocución principal se va a establecer con la teoría crítica y el pensamiento de Jacques Rancière, si bien no querría limitarse a simple glosa de sus consideraciones sobre el arte y la intervención cultural como actos de resistencia. La propia vigencia y el rendimiento de este último horizonte conceptual es asunto abordado en otros capítulos de este libro y ha sido una preocupación central en los trabajos de la red Poéticas de Resistencia desde su constitución hace unos años. Sin embargo, no es un objetivo prioritario de este trabajo regresar a ese debate, ni tampoco al que podría concretarse haciendo uso de frases como 'el compromiso artístico e intelectual en la posmodernidad' o 'la poesía emancipatoria como formación discursiva'.

El impulso es en cualquier caso hacia una teoría posfoucaultiana del discurso (Badiou, Laclau, Butler, Agamben, Žižek), una semiótica histórica y una filología (que se sabe) política en el mismo sentido en el que lo es la estética en Rancière: en tanto régimen histórico del pensamiento efectuado por la obra artística. Al mismo tiempo, como lugar propicio para

¹ Capítulo vinculado con el proyecto de investigación *El discurso no lírico en la poesía contemporánea: espacios, sujetos, hibridación enunciativa, medialidad*, que recibe financiación pública del Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación del Gobierno español (FFL2009-12746).